

UNDERSTANDING AND WORKING WITH ANXIETY

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RELATING TO YOUR ANXIETY OR PANIC

Panic attacks and anxiety often intensify and get reinforced when you 'react' fearfully through a fight/flight reaction to stress related body sensations and overwhelming feelings, or symptoms of anxiety – E.g. - Racing heart, sweaty palms, jelly legs, shakiness, heat, shallow breathing, racing thoughts, tense tummy or chest. Often the symptoms of panic and anxiety will reduce in intensity once the fight/flight reaction to stress related symptoms is broken and you are no longer fighting them.

- **First order of business - Notice and become mindful** - Ask yourself, how do I know anxiety is here? What are the body sensations, feelings, body posture, thoughts, images in my mind and attention patterns that go with anxiety.
- **Relationship to anxiety** - Notice what meaning and judgments you make about your anxiety sensations and emotional distress in the first place? *What kind of relationship do you have with your anxiety sensations* and feelings of distress? Do you automatically - Fight the feelings; have catastrophic future focused fantasies or excessive worry and the 'What if's'; shame yourself and judge yourself for feeling the anxiety or distress? Notice the effect of your reaction to your original distress and anxiety symptoms – does it intensify it or lessen it? Remind yourself that your anxiety is here for a reason, and if you really listen to it, you will find out what its here to tell you.
- **Notice your Self-talk** – be curious if any of your self-talk is feeding the anxiety? Observe and question any self-talk that seems to fuel your distress or anxiety e.g. *I can't cope with this; I will fall apart; I'm going crazy; this is abnormal; I will die; I shouldn't feel this; I'm weak.* Practice observing the thoughts as 'just thoughts' (like clouds in the sky), rather than facts, and letting them go, and or replacing anxiety fueling self-talk with calming and realistic and self-compassionate self-talk, or Examples may be – *This will pass; This is hard but I can handle this; I can ride this out; So what if I'm anxious, I can deal with it; I'm not going to die; this will pass; it's just anxiety.*
- **Titration and pendulation** - Practice the attitude of welcoming, being kind to, accepting and courageously allowing your anxiety sensations to be here as they are – for just one drop at a time at first (*this is titration!*). Allow yourself to touch in the edges anxiety sensations in your body, name and tolerate them for a few seconds, and then shift your attention to something that soothes and resources you (*this is pendulation*) e.g. *One of your 5 senses, your breath, your feet on the ground, a positive memory, or a neutral place in your body.* As you practice titration and pendulation for a few rounds, each time you sense into your anxiety, see if you can create a little more time and space for the anxiety sensations 'to happen' without trying to get rid of it or run from it straight away. See what happens next. Do the sensations increase, decrease, stay the same or something different? This will help you slowly build your 'window of tolerance' for anxiety sensations and your confidence that you can face anxiety without getting swamped by it.

- **Self-compassion and acceptance** - As you get better at touching into and touching out of the sensations of anxiety, practice building acceptance *that it is here for now and see what happens if you don't fight it. Practice allowing it...even if it's for only 10 seconds at first. Practice getting with it, instead of getting rid of it!* The attitude of fighting or trying to WILL your anxiety away actually maintains it – as they saying goes 'What you resist persists', and goes down into the basement and pumps iron! Research has found that the more you stop fighting the anxiety the more it will dissolve in its own time. Practice putting your one hand over your heart and the other over another place where you feel anxious – then practice saying to yourself with kindness – *It's OK, I'm here for you. Ill support you. This is a moment of suffering. This is part of being human. May I be kind to myself right now!*
- **Triggers and early signs** – Find out what are the prior events/situation/people or internal thoughts, feelings and body sensations that triggers your anxiety – do you notice any situations e.g. Uncertainty, or thinking patterns (e.g. high expectations, worry, self-criticism), sensations, feelings, situations or people that seem to precede it? What kinds of feelings and thoughts do these triggers evoke in you? See if you can observe the first early symptoms of anxiety arise and consciously practice grounding, shifting focus to your 5 senses, long outbreath breathing, self-compassionate self-talk and 'letting the symptoms happen' before it builds up into panic attacks.

REGULATING ANXIETY SENSATIONS AND THOUGHTS

All the below approaches support you to NOTICE and REGULATE your distress, overwhelm and anxiety producing thoughts and feelings without trying to fight them. They support you to build awareness of the present moment and ground you. Awareness and regulation break the pattern of fueling, fighting or denying your anxiety/distress, empowers you to become bigger than your distress, and to have choices and control over where you put your attention. You can begin to respond with awareness and clarity instead of react to what is happening.

- **Breathing** – When you notice yourself becoming anxious or stressed practice breathing slowly and deeply inhale into your tummy and chest through your nose (7 seconds) and hold for 3 seconds after breathing in. Then exhale slowly (for 11 seconds) and fully all the way out – longer than the inbreath (*called the 7/11 breath cycle*). Practice this until the symptoms lessen. Continue focusing all your attention on your breathing, particularly in lengthening the outbreath – Notice any sensations of relaxation in your body as you do this.
- **Mindful Body awareness** – Practice paying complete attention to your distressed feelings or anxiety sensations in your body while consciously letting go of entertaining any thoughts, worries and ideas about the anxiety. Paradoxically, this practice of 'attending and befriending' your uncomfortable sensations often help anxiety dissipate naturally. Remember it's often your thoughts and resistance that feed it - and the more you fight the more power it has over you. Focus your

complete attention on the **quality, shape, size and temperature** of related body sensations (in your chest, belly, arms and legs) of anxiety – go into them, feel them, observe them and see what happens next– Remember to keep breathing and remind yourself that ‘you are not your anxiety’, you are the observer of your anxiety!! Dont turn it into an identity about you! They are just sensations passing through like clouds in the sky!

- **External Mindfulness** – Focus your complete attention on one or several senses that seems to bring some pleasure of safety (seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, sensing, tasting) for 5 to 10 minutes– e.g. Notice 3 things you can hear? Notice 3 things you can see? Notice 3 things you can sense through your skin and touch?
- **Engage in a simple physical repetitive task while paying total attention to what you are doing** e.g. walking, exercise, doing the dishes, stretching your arms or legs. Practice this regularly – everyday for at least 10 mins. This is a healthy form of distraction that keeps you grounded and brings your attention back to the here and now, and away from unhelpful thoughts that fuel your anxiety and keep you in vicious circles.
- **Grounding** – Alternatively focus all of your attention on your feet on the ground – See if you can feel your feet touching your shoes and socks, and the associated sensations of this e.g temperature, comfort, tensions, energy, relaxation, distribution of weight of feet on ground. Feel your sitbones and back on your seat if sitting and associated sensations. Feel the sensation of your clothes touching your skin. Do this for 5-10 minutes regularly. **All of these above exercises can support you to feel calmer and more aware with regular practice**

DEEPENING YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF ANXIETY

The following points are useful to help you deepen your understanding of what your anxiety/distress is telling you about what needs attention, what is out of balance, and what underlying issues may need addressing.

- **What’s’ under your anxiety/distress?** - Be curious about what is underneath your anxiety and distress– Sometimes anxiety is a result of conflict between ‘how you think things should be’ or an ideal self-image (eg I should be perfect), AND ‘how things actually are’- your natural human limitations or what you are actually feeling, or between two impulses e.g. to fight or to flee. You may be ashamed, afraid of and avoiding your present moment feelings. Anxiety can also be a result of a buildup of ongoing stress, imbalances in your life, and underlying feelings that you are ignoring. Sometimes underneath our anxiety/distress are other feelings such as shame, anger, exhaustion, frustration, grief, hurt, vulnerability or powerlessness –so be curious what you are not letting yourself acknowledge and feel? If you bring kind curious attention to these underlying feelings and ‘What these feelings are telling you,’ your anxiety/distress may lessen or get resolved. What’s happening (too much or missing) in my environment that is contributing to it? What support do I need from others? What underlying thoughts and beliefs be driving it? How might it be a signal to me about what needs attention inside of me? Counselling

may be useful for this *process to clarify issues and to see how your anxiety/distress is a signal to what needs attention.*

- When you have some space practice the attitude of being curious about your anxiety and intense feelings – as if you are a passionate curious scientist studying something new — See if you can ask yourself simple questions and wait for the answer to come without forcing it– What is the quality of this anxiety/feeling in my body? How intense is it? Where is it most intense in my body? Least intense? What might my anxiety/distress be telling me about? What does my anxiety need from me that will support it to relax?
- **Study your automatic patterns of thinking-** Be curious about any patterns of thinking (future worrying or anticipating, obsessive planning, automatic assumptions, beliefs, high standards and judgments about you or others, or ruminating about the past) that might be fueling your anxiety? What are you hoping to achieve by engaging in these thinking patterns? Are they a misguided attempt to help you feel more in control or less vulnerable? Are these thinking patterns really helping you or hindering you?
- **Your anxiety management strategies** - Also be curious about your anxiety management strategies E.g keeping busy, focused on other's needs, withdrawing, pleasing, perfecting, procrastinating! Ask yourself *what am I attempting to achieve, or avoiding by coping this way?* Sometimes it's about your best attempt to feel safe, in control, or comfortable, or a way to avoid feeling powerless, or other vulnerable feelings. However, are your anxiety management strategies really serving you, or are they making it worse? Ask yourself “Would I handle any challenging situations better if I – focused on my own needs; accepted what I'm feeling for now, practiced relaxation, grounding and centering myself; focusing on the present moment? Be curious about *what can you learn from this situation* that might help you change old coping patterns that are not serving you and creating the same negative outcome.
- **Honoring your feelings:** Find ways to pay attention to and honor your underlying feelings instead of rejecting or fighting them. Ask yourself ‘*what am I not letting myself feel?*’ *What am I not expressing or ignoring? What feelings am I avoiding?* e.g anger, hurt, grief, fear, shame? See if you can stay curious about this and why you avoid these feelings? Do you have any support to face and express these feelings? Stress often accumulates if you keep it all locked inside without expressing any of it. See what happens if you completely feel and allow your feelings to be there for now?

TAKING ACTION AND FINDING AGENCY

- **Taking action, setting boundaries and saying No-** Explore all the things that you can **realistically** do to take positive action to change any external circumstances that are contributing to your stress or anxiety? Recognize and experiment with letting go and surrendering to what you cannot control (e.g. other people's behavior; future events that haven't happened yet). What actions or boundaries can

you take that would support you now? Ask yourself “What is truly my responsibility” What am I willing to let into my psychological boundary and what do I want to keep out of my psychological boundary? What are you being overly responsible for, and what responsibility can you give back to others? Can I also let other people have their own emotional process without me trying to fix or change it?

- **Getting support** – Do you need more emotional or practical support? Is there a way that your not expressing these needs? Ask yourself if you are too alone with your anxiety and associated feelings and needs? Is this making it worse for you? Consider where and how you could reach out for more support, and ask what is stopping you? Often talking about the issues, you are facing with someone you trust can alleviate anxiety and support the changes you need to make.
- **Self-soothing and self-support**– Consider your own needs for support, space, time, relaxation and play and making choices that support you to feel better now and for tomorrow. What have you done in the past when you feel distressed, anxious or off balance that soothed you? What can you do now that would sooth you and bring you some satisfaction or relaxation in a healthy way? E.g. Walking, exercise, going to the Gym, listening to music, having a bath, relaxation techniques, yoga, meditation, hanging out with a good friend, going to the movies, focusing on the present moment.